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ABSTRACT

Intended as an introduction to those about to visit the United States for the first time, this booklet provides general information about the United States and its people. The title, derived from Mark Twain's observation that "the only distinguishing characteristic of the American character I've been able to discover is a fondness for ice water," reflects the variety and diversity of the American people. The booklet, however, while not losing sight of the differences, focuses primarily on cultural similarities of Americans. Brief sections present information on major geographic regions of America, America as a "pluralistic" society, American government, the free enterprise economic system, religious liberty in America, education, family life, and social life of American youth. Sections describing behavioral characteristics of the American people discuss American individualism, equality, friendliness, assertiveness, and the importance of hard work. Non-verbal behavior characteristics of Americans are also described. The booklet concludes with an annotated list of eight publications produced between 1962 and 1983 on the culture of the United States. (LH)

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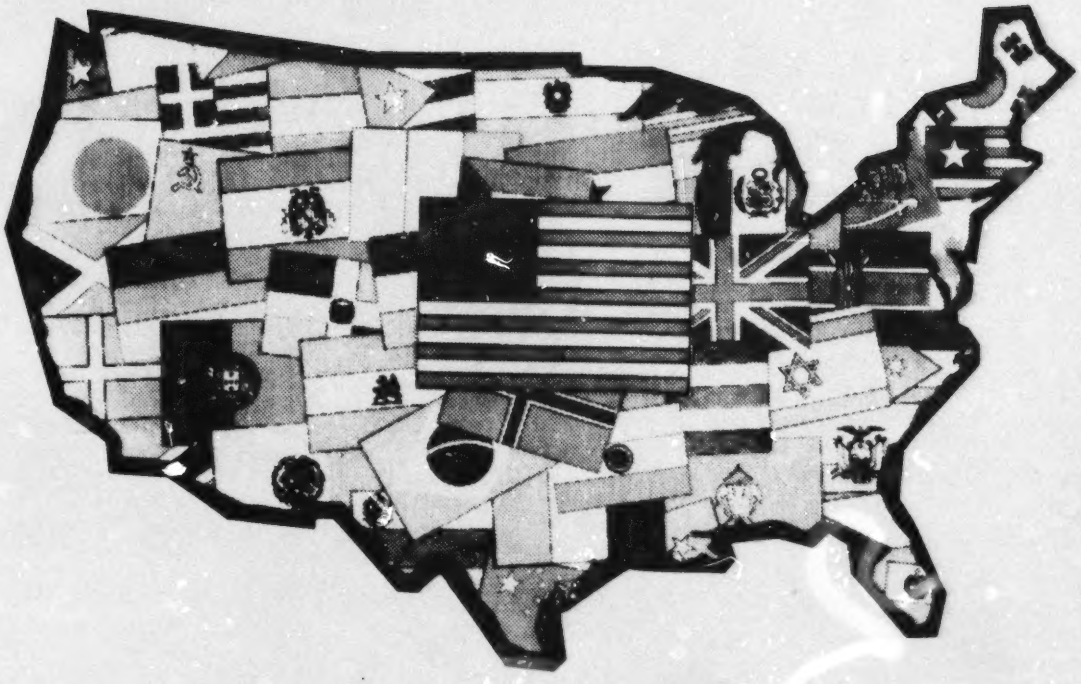

These States are the amplest poem,
Here is not merely a nation but
a teeming Nation of nations.

—Walt Whitman

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A FONDNESS FOR ICE WATER:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE U.S.A. AND ITS PEOPLE

by Cornelius Lee Grove
and members of the U.S. staff of*
AFS International / Intercultural Programs

1984

The United States of America is geographically the fourth largest nation on earth. Its population of over 225 million includes people from every imaginable background. The popular 19th century author Mark Twain once said: "The only distinguishing characteristic of the American character I've been able to discover is a fondness for ice water." Twain recognized that people in the U.S. have their origins in every other culture of the world, and that it's difficult to distinguish the diverse peoples of the U.S. from peoples elsewhere. But Twain was exaggerating, for there are many similarities among U.S. people. These cultural similarities will be the focus of this brief introduction, but we will try not to lose sight of the differences.

GEOGRAPHY

The United States occupies the central portion of the North American continent. It has two major groups of mountain ranges, both running roughly North-South. Not far from the Atlantic coast in the East are the Appalachian Mountains, the smaller group. The Appalachians are geologically old and therefore relatively low, rounded, and heavily forested. Much of the Western third of the country is covered by geologically younger mountains that are higher, more jagged, and lightly forested. The major range in the West is known as the Rocky Mountains. Between the Appalachians and the Rockies is a large region

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called the Great Plains; here the land is flat for as far as the eye can see in any direction.

Alaska and Hawaii are two portions of the U.S. that are detached from the main mid-continental group of 48 states. Alaska, located at the extreme Northwest of the continent, is by far the largest state; alone, it accounts for 16% of the area of the nation. Hawaii is a group of volcanic islands located in the Pacific Ocean more than 3000 kilometers from the mainland.

The climate of the U.S. varies greatly from place to place due to the great size of the country. Winters in the Northern states (and, of course, in Alaska) are likely to be long and bitterly cold. Summers in the Southern states are likely to be quite hot; in the Southeast high humidity accompanies the heat, but in the Southwest it is hot and dry. Since it is impossible to generalize about the climate, you should seek information about the weather from people who are living in the region of the U.S. where you will be staying.

THE PEOPLE

The United States has been described as a "melting pot" as well as a "pluralistic society." People from every corner of the earth have immigrated to the U.S. since the 1600s, when colonization of the New World began. A great wave of immigration occurred in the period from roughly 1900 to 1925, and another era of heavy immigration is occurring *right now*. Evidence of the immigrant origins of the people of the U.S. may be found today in the great diversity of family and place names, of foods, of pastimes, of social and religious rituals, and even (in certain sections of the country) of languages and styles of dress. The term "melting pot" suggests that these immigrants, no matter what their origins, have become more and more like one another as they have adapted to their new homeland.

The melting pot image is not completely accurate, however. Immigrant groups seem to retain many of their special characteristics from generation to generation. The term "pluralistic society" emphasizes that important differences continue to exist among groups of people who all call themselves "Americans." In fact, many people in the U.S. like to emphasize their ethnic backgrounds by calling themselves, for example, Italian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Portuguese-Americans, Irish-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and so forth. Millions of people in the U.S. have their origins in Central and South America, and speak Spanish as their first or second language; they often call themselves Hispanic-Americans. The many cultural differences found in the U.S. are thought by many to contribute to the strength and richness of the nation.

In addition to variety in terms of national origin, the people of the U.S. have a wide range of differences in values and lifestyles that seems related to the region of the country and the type of locality in which they live. Since 1900, more and more people have moved to cities and large metropolitan areas, but a substantial number of people continue to live in small towns and villages (including suburbs within daily traveling distance of a city) and in rural areas. It is true that life in a small community may lack some of the variety and excitement associated with major cities. On the other hand, life in a town, village, or small suburb can be satisfying because of the slower pace of life and the presence of only limited numbers of people gives one an opportunity to become well acquainted with one's neighbors. Some American people would say that the lifestyles that are most characteristic of the U.S. are more likely to be found in smaller communities than in the large cities. This opinion often is related to a distrust of urban values, which some Americans believe to be too liberal and modern. The attitudes and values of people who live in smaller communities in the U.S. are generally *conservative* and, in some respects, *traditional*. Foreign visitors, who often form their expectations of the U.S. on the basis of television and motion pictures exported from the U.S., often are surprised to discover the basic conservatism of the American people.

GOVERNMENT

Within the United States, there are approximately 80,000 separate and autonomous governments. One of them is the national government in Washington, DC, the national capital. Another 50 are the governments of the 50 states. All the rest -- more than 79,000 -- are governments that operate on the local level. To understand why there are so many local governments in the U.S., you should keep in mind that the U.S. is a very large and diverse nation. Within it, there are countless things and procedures that need to be developed, managed, regulated, and sometimes changed if daily life is to proceed smoothly. Governments large and small perform these functions. But most of them are small because the people of the U.S. always have tended to fear governments that are large and powerful. They have wanted to insure that government remains responsive to the needs and opinions of the people. Therefore, they have arranged for each unit of government to remain physically close to the people it serves, and to have only those powers that are absolutely necessary to carry out its assigned function. These factors help to explain why almost all of the 80,000 governments are local governments with strictly limited powers.

No matter where you may find yourself in the United States, you will be under the jurisdiction of several local governments. This is true because more than half of the local governments in the U.S. control a

single function. The best known of these single-function (or "special") governmental districts are the independent school districts that control local elementary and secondary schools. Examples of other kinds of special districts include those that oversee water supply, fire protection, sewage disposal, soil conservation, irrigation, electric power distribution, housing, cemeteries, and so forth.

The national government is more powerful than any state or local government. A state government is more powerful than a local government within its borders. But officials at the higher levels of government do not rule those at the lower levels. Officials at *all* levels are elected by the people they serve; they are not appointed by higher-level officials. Officials at all levels must cooperate with one another in order to get the business of government accomplished. "Federalism" is the word that sums up the cooperative relationship among officials of the three levels of government in the U.S.A.

ECONOMY

The economic system of the U.S. is based on the principle of free enterprise, which means that economic decisions are made privately by individuals and companies. The American "capitalistic" system operates without an overall central economic plan. No one person, group, or government agency decides what or how much should be produced, nor what prices should be charged for goods and services. Business people generally are free to make these decisions themselves. Free enterprise rests on the belief that each individual knows what is best for himself or herself; thus, individuals decide how to earn an income, what to buy, how much to pay, how to invest savings, when to borrow money, when to cash in investments or sell possessions, and so forth. The right of an individual to own property also is basic to the free enterprise system. Individuals and private companies own most raw materials, factories, and other means of production. These owners are free, within certain limitations, to use their property as they see fit and to attain a profit (or to suffer a loss) from its use.

Competition is an important feature of the U.S. economic system. Since the overall system is not centrally managed, many companies may produce similar goods or offer similar services. Consumers of goods and services usually try to pay as little as possible for goods and services of high quality. Producers therefore strive to out-perform one another in making available to consumers goods that are high in quality but low in cost. Producers who perform poorly in this kind of competitive market system are likely to be forced out of business, but this is one of the risks inherent in a free enterprise economic system.

Since about 1900, the role of government (especially the national government) in the economic system of the U.S. has grown. Many important industries are regulated, though not completely controlled, by government. Some fields of economic activity that are too expensive for private companies, such as the exploration of outer space, have been taken over by government. In addition, governments at the local, state, and national levels now operate many social welfare schemes, some of which are primarily for the relief of the poor, and others of which benefit almost every citizen to some extent. Because of these and other important roles that the government plays in the economy, the U.S. economic system cannot be described as wholly capitalistic. But neither is it heavily socialistic. "Modified free enterprise" is a term that often is used to describe the U.S. economic system today.

RELIGION

One of the chief principles of the American way of life is "separation of church and state." This means that no formal connection may exist between any level of government and any religious group, and that the government cannot prohibit the practice of any religion. For any person, the principle of separation of church and state means that he or she is free to belong to any religious group, or to no religious group at all.

In spite of the principle of religious liberty, the United States has remained associated throughout its history with the religious and moral beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Most Americans voluntarily belong to one of the Christian religious groups -- to one of the numerous Protestant denominations, to the Roman Catholic Church, or (in smaller numbers) to other Christian groups such as the Greek Orthodox Church. The Old and New Testaments of the Judeo-Christian Bible continue to be the best selling books in the U.S., year after year. Besides Christians and Jews, another large religious group in the U.S. is the Mormons, who are especially concentrated in and around the Western state of Utah. People who practice every religion imaginable have the liberty to worship as they please in the United States.

The extent to which families in the U.S. practice their religious beliefs varies widely. Many families are deeply involved in religious life and spend much of their time in worship or social activities organized by their local church or synagogue. Other families are content with attending religious services once a week or even less frequently. Still others do not associate themselves with a religious group in any way. Even if you are visiting the U.S. for a relatively short time, you are likely to come into contact with people for whom religious be-

liefs and religiously based moral values are of major importance. You may be invited by these people to participate in church-related social events. Such an invitation does not necessarily mean that they are trying to convert you to their particular type of religion; because of the tradition of religious liberty in the U.S., your convictions regarding the practice of religion probably will be respected. Keep in mind that in many smaller towns and rural areas, community social activities -- especially those for young people -- are very often organized by religious groups. Therefore, if you can participate in these activities without compromising your own religious principles, do so. Your presence will delight your hosts and will bring you into contact with many other members of the community whom you might not be able to meet otherwise.

Mark Twain may have had religion in mind when he said that a fondness for ice water is the only distinguishing characteristic of Americans. For the variety of religious belief and practice that exists in the U.S. is nearly as great as that found throughout the world. Remember, however, that the influence of Christianity -- and especially of conservative or "evangelical" Protestantism -- is very strong in the U.S. Some of the themes stressed by Protestantism are (1) that hard work, progress, and personal achievement are associated with being in favor with God, (2) that moral and ethical principles apply equally and impersonally to every human being, and (3) that each person, as an *individual*, is responsible to God for his or her behavior. Themes such as these help to account for the basic conservatism of the people of the United States.

EDUCATION

Basic responsibility for education in the United States belongs to the governments of the 50 states, not to the federal government in Washington, DC. Throughout U.S. history, however, the state governments have delegated their responsibility for education to local public school districts (which are examples of single-function governmental districts of which we spoke earlier), and to the boards of trustees of colleges and universities.

There are some 15,000 local school districts in the U.S., each one controlling the public elementary and secondary schools in a geographical area no larger than a city, town, village, or rural county. In each of these districts, the top policy-making body is the "board of education" or "school committee," whose members usually are elected every few years by the voters of the school district. Specific educational or professional qualifications rarely are necessary for a

citizen who wishes to stand as a candidate for his or her local school board. Private organizations and religious groups also are able to operate elementary and secondary schools in all 50 states. These non-public schools are not related to the local school district, and often enjoy considerable freedom from the general educational guidelines that have been set by the state government. About 50% of the non-public schools in the United States are operated by the Roman Catholic Church, and another 30% are run by other religious groups of all kinds.

Colleges and universities also may be operated by private organizations and religious groups. These, like those that are "public," receive their authority to grant degrees from the state (not the federal) government where they are located. Nearly all institutions of higher education receive financial support from the state and federal governments; the public institutions receive considerably more funds from this source. Colleges and universities have other sources of financial support such as contributions from individuals and philanthropic foundations, but virtually all -- even those that are public -- charge fees to the students who attend. The cost for one year of university education at some private institutions is now as much as $10,000.

The typical American secondary (or "high") school serves several hundred or even a few thousand students of many backgrounds, interests, and levels of ability. Because public high schools have such a diverse student body, they usually offer a very wide range of courses of study and educational programs. Students are able to choose from among many options as they plan their academic program for each year. Another common feature of U.S. high schools is that they have a sense of community spirit that is focused primarily on the athletic teams. Among the most popular students in a school are its leading athletes, especially those who play (American-style) football. High schools also have students, almost all girls, who are "cheerleaders," and whose job it is to lead the student body in cheering and clapping in support of the school's team during athletic competitions. In some schools, "pep rallies" also are held separately from sports events so that the students can work up enthusiasm for an important athletic contest with a rival school.

In addition to athletics, most schools have a wide variety of other extracurricular activities. These activities include clubs and interest groups that are joined voluntarily by students and that are advised by members of the faculty. In the case of some activities, such as the school yearbook, the level of work and dedication on the part of the students and faculty advisor may be extraordinarily high. Many schools have several musical groups (including the marching band that performs at athletic events) as well as a number of annual dramatic productions. In addition, there are many social events for students, topped each year by the formal dances or "proms" for the 11th and 12th grade students. Proms are elaborate affairs, often requiring formal dress, that

are paid for in part by money raised by the students during the year through events such as car washes, cake sales, raffles, and so forth.

One of the features of classroom life that foreign students often find unusual is that teachers encourage the students to express their own opinions during frequent periods of discussion. Many teachers have no objection to having their statements questioned or challenged by students, for this is considered to show critical and independent thinking, which is highly valued. Teaching methods that are not very common in U.S. high schools include lectures, formal recitations, and rote memorization. Exchange students sometimes are surprised by the efforts of American teachers to make the learning process enjoyable and "fun." Teachers do this through the use of audio-visual aides (such as audio- and video-tapes, filmstrips, and motion pictures) and a variety of games and competitive pastimes in which the concepts or facts to be learned are featured. The purpose of such activities is to increase each student's personal motivation to learn; educators in the U.S. believe strongly that people learn better when they truly *want* to learn and are enjoying themselves while participating in the learning process.

Although students in the U.S. are required to present a considerable amount of written work (such as essays, book reviews, and research or "term" papers), examinations are most often of the "multiple choice" type. In this type of exam, each question has several possible pre-printed answers from which the correct one must be chosen. In other words, the student is required merely to recognize the correct answer, not to recall it from memory (as in the case of exams requiring long essays). Several examinations typically are given during the school year in each course. A student's final grade is calculated on the basis of these exam scores along with the scores he or she has received on written assignments. Many teachers also include an additional score in the calculation, this one representing the quality and extent of the student's participation in classroom discussions.

Students from other countries who attend school in the U.S. may be shocked by the absence of formality and respect in relationships between American teachers and students. But student-teacher relationships must be viewed in light of the fact that *all* relationships in the U.S. tend to appear informal and casual. This informality does not mean that Americans are unaware of social hierarchies. Their casual friendliness towards others (including others above and below them in the hierarchy) should be understood as a kind of "social oil" that maintains smooth and pleasant relationships without necessarily diminishing the respect of one person for another. Teachers in the U.S. tend to be friendly and approachable, both in and outside the classroom. Students may come to regard a favorite teacher not only as a tutor, but also as a personal counselor or even a mentor.

Most of what we have just described with respect to U.S. high schools also is true of life at institutions of higher education, especially at those where students are working for their first university degree. For even though higher education tends to be very expensive, a relatively high proportion of students (compared with other countries) goes on to attend college or university after they leave high school. You will better understand education in the United States if you keep in mind two key facts: (1) Almost all high schools, and many institutions of higher education (especially "public" colleges and universities) are *not* elitist institutions educating only the most brilliant students. (2) Education in the U.S. is based on a philosophy that a "well-rounded" person is better able to cope with life than one who is highly, but narrowly, trained academically.

In short, education in the U.S. has been *democratized*. This means that the emphasis is on providing every youngster with broad and varied educational experiences so that, regardless of background or economic circumstances, he or she will have an *equal opportunity* to be successful in adult life. This objective is unlike that common in some other countries, where extensive and highly specialized training is provided for only the most brilliant youth, while the many who remain have few opportunities to learn anything more than the basic educational skills. The emphasis on democratizing American education is relatively new, having come into prominence only since the end of the Second World War.

FAMILY LIFE

The great variety of economic, cultural, and regional lifestyles in the United States makes it difficult to generalize about American family life. Nevertheless, a number of statements can be made that are true for many, even most, American families. For example, most families are small compared with families in other nations. Extended families (that is, families including members from more than two generations) are rare in the U.S. Most families comprise one or two parents and one, two, or three children. Divorce, which now affects nearly 50% of U.S. families, has made one-parent families increasingly common. Nearly one child in five lives in a single-parent family, and 80% of these families are headed by the mother.

Children in the U.S. are expected to leave their parents' home when they become adults. Parents and their adult children (as well as other relatives such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and so forth) usually live at some distance from one another, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of kilometers apart. The attraction of good jobs in distant places is the most common reason why relatives scatter themselves across the nation

in this way. You should not assume, however, that parents and their grown children are unconcerned about one another simply because they are separated by so much distance. Rather, the separation is seen as normal by all concerned; such separation is the accepted pattern in U.S. culture. Parents and children who live far apart keep in touch by letters, telephone calls, and holiday visits. When crises arise, people will travel great distances to be of assistance to their close relatives. For example, a mother is likely to travel as far as necessary to assist her grown daughter when the daughter is coping with her first baby.

Parents usually expect that their children will choose their own careers and their own spouses. Americans feel that it is important for young people to make these key decisions regarding their lives, for such decision-making is a display of independence and an assurance that the young people will be able to survive on their own. On the other hand, parents may become upset when their children who have strong talents are apparently wasting those talents on a low-status career. And there are still a few families that urge their children to join the family business or to follow a certain occupation that is traditional in the family. In some cases, parents who are strongly committed to the independence of their grown children nevertheless will help them get started in adult life by paying for their university education (which is very common), giving them money to help buy a home or start a business, or assisting them in other important ways.

Within the society as a whole, the traditional distinctions between the roles of men and women are gradually diminishing. People are becoming increasingly aware that women, because of their close association with home and children, have had many fewer opportunities than men to fulfill their individual talents and pursue their personal interests. In short, women and men have not had *equal opportunities*. People who support the "women's liberation" movement have been urging women to be more assertive in seeking paid employment and attempting to become successful in an occupation or career outside the home. To a considerable extent, this has been happening; more than half of the mothers in the United States now have jobs outside the home. Husbands also are being urged to share the work of cooking, washing, and cleaning the house equally with their wives. To a considerable extent, this has *not* been happening; many women have found that they are burdened by having the responsibilities of both a job and the work of the house, a fact that reflects the continuing strength of traditional values in the United States. You should know, however, that husbands expect to do at least a *little* housework, and that children commonly have routine chores that they are expected to accomplish around the house. For instance, a husband might wash or dry the dishes at the evening meal and a young child might take out the garbage each day. In many families, children are paid for doing these chores, or receive a week-

ly "allowance" of money, so that they gradually can learn to assume more and more responsibility for their own private expenses.

Generally speaking, elderly people in the U.S. are not accorded the same degree of respect that is common in most other parts of the world. Elderly parents move in with their grown children only infrequently; they are much more likely to live in their own households as long as they are physically able to manage on their own. Thereafter, most are cared for in special homes for the aged, where they are visited occasionally by their children and grandchildren. Two reasons can be given for the generally low status of old people in the U.S. One is that there is an enormous emphasis in American culture on *youthfulness* -- that is, on looking and acting young. The other is that the rapid pace of technological change makes it relatively easy for younger people to discount the wisdom of the elderly as out-of-date and no longer relevant. Elderly people commonly feel isolated from the mainstream of the society. But a change may be on its way. More and more people have been living to old age because of improved medical care and public health measures. This growing group of "senior citizens" has been organizing socially and politically to insure that their rights will be respected and that their opportunities to live a full life will not be denied.

SOCIAL LIFE OF YOUTH

Young people in the U.S. usually have enough freedom, money, and (thanks to the automobile) mobility to gather in each other's homes or other favorite meeting places. Still, much of their social life revolves around their school, church, or organized youth group. Social convention used to require that boys and girls be kept separate much of the time, but, because of the growing concern about equal opportunity for women, much more mixing is common nowadays. Single-sex secondary schools and colleges are virtually a thing of the past, and even organizations such as the Young Woman's Christian Association and the Boy Scouts of America have opened their memberships to both boys and girls in recent years.

Boys and girls typically begin to "date" one another -- that is, to go places together as a couple -- between the ages of 13 and 16. In some communities it is common for dating couples to go around in large groups, while in other communities the local custom is for a boy and girl who are dating to go around most often as a couple. If a boy and girl develop a romantic attraction for each other, they may decide to "go steady." This arrangement commits each to date only the other person, but is n.. considered as serious a commitment as becoming engaged

to be married. It is rather common for people who are going steady to "break up" and begin to date other people. In fact, people who are engaged to be married sometimes break up, also.

The traditional courtship pattern is for the boy to take the initiative in scheduling a date, and to pay for the expenses of the date. However, it is becoming common in many communities for girls to be almost as free as boys to take the initiative. Furthermore, girls increasingly are sharing the costs of the date (a scheme that previously was so out of the ordinary that it has a special name: Dutch dating). These changes in the social patterns of young people have come about in large measure because of the influence of the women's liberation movement, which was mentioned earlier.

Displays of affection such as hand-holding, hugging, and kissing are quite common between young people who are dating, especially those who are going steady. These affectionate displays may occur in public as well as in private, and, within certain limits that may vary from community to community, are not considered rude or vulgar. You should be aware that affectionate touching between a boy and girl does not necessarily indicate that the two are planning to get married or are going steady; it might only indicate that they find each other attractive and enjoyable to be with.

It is well known that some male visitors to the United States arrive with mistaken notions about American women and girls, notions that they probably derived from watching exported U.S. television and movies. Some apparently believe that women in the U.S. like to be dominated by "macho" or "he-man" types. Some seem to expect that, if a man shows a woman a good time at his financial expense, the women is obligated to have sex with him at the end of the evening. Some appear to be under the impression that women in the U.S. tend to be sexually promiscuous. ***These ideas are false!***

It is true that many American youth engage in sexual activity, but it also is true that ***many do not***. Sexual intimacy between a boy and girl in the U.S. most often follows a period of several months during which the two enjoy a wide range of activities with each other, become well acquainted, and develop romantic feelings toward one another. You must not feel that you are obligated to hold hands, kiss, or engage in any other sort of intimate contact with an American of either sex. In the vast majority of cases, if an American seems to want you to engage in sexual activity beyond what you think is appropriate, a polite but firm "No!" will cause him or her to stop.

Parties and social gatherings differ greatly from country to country; within the United States, too, the way people customarily behave

at parties differs from region to region, and from age-group to age-group. One fairly common pattern is for males and females to mix together freely, and for people to remain standing and to move about the room from time to time in order to meet and talk with many others who are attending. Most conversations at parties involve three or four people, and these conversational groups change composition frequently as individuals move from one group to another. A person who wants to leave a conversation group either may excuse himself (for example, "Excuse me, a friend of mine just arrived.") or, if not directly involved in the conversation, may simply walk away. Although the first guests to arrive at a party may be introduced to each other by the host or hostess, guests are expected to introduce themselves to each other as more and more people arrive. People who come to a party together are not expected to remain together throughout the party; this is true even if they are a dating couple or husband-and-wife. In general, parties in the U.S. are very informal and often (but not always) include the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Recalling Mark Twain's comment, we should add that just about any beverage served at a party anywhere in the U.S. will be drunk ice cold.

Generalizing about the use of alcoholic beverages in the U.S. is especially difficult. On the one hand, alcohol is produced and consumed in large quantities by Americans. On the other hand, there are a considerable number of Americans who are *strongly* opposed to the use of alcohol in any form; this is because of their conservative Protestant religious beliefs. The situation is complicated by the fact that laws governing the sale and consumption of alcohol are made at the *state* level, and sometimes at the *local* level. Furthermore, individual families may have their own rules about the use of alcohol. Some families prohibit drinking any time, any place. Some families do not allow young people to drink in their home. And some families allow young people to drink in their home under adult supervision. As a newcomer to the United States, you may be perplexed by the widely differing attitudes toward alcohol. You should keep in mind that almost all states have laws that set a minimum age (usually 18, 19, 20, or 21) for the purchase of alcohol; these laws have been strictly enforced in recent years. Be sure to ask people in your host community about the state laws and local community standards regarding the use of alcoholic beverages.

The use of drugs by young people in the U.S. varies greatly from community to community, and even from school to school. Drug use by teenagers is regarded as a serious social problem, especially with respect to the so-called "hard" drugs such as heroin. Many student exchange organizations take a very strong stand against the use of *any* drug not prescribed by a physician, including marijuana or "pot." For example, AFS International immediately returns to his or her home country any AFS student found to be using drugs.

SOME AMERICAN CHARACTERISTICS

Over the past 50 years or so, anthropologists and other social scientists have learned a great deal about the habits of thought and patterns of behavior that, broadly speaking, are characteristic of the people of the United States. A few of these characteristics are discussed in the following paragraphs.

INDIVIDUALISM: The emphasis on individualism in the U.S. is very strong. Research carried out in the 1970s that involved people from 50 different nations found that the stress on individualism in the U.S. was greater than in any other nation studied. So let us say at once that *people in the U.S. are able to cooperate with one another, and frequently do so*, in spite of their idealization of personal independence and self-reliance. Individualism does not mean that one ignores or is antagonistic towards other people, nor that one is completely selfish. Rather, individualism is a belief that a person's well-being and personal interests are best looked after by himself or herself. One of the key historical factors that has helped to promote and maintain this belief is conservative Protestant theology, which (as we said earlier) holds that each person is directly responsible to God for his or her behavior, and tends to associate hard work and personal achievement with being in favor with God. Thus, in the U.S., individuals are encouraged to achieve through their own efforts, and to develop a distinct identity or "personality." A competitive spirit commonly pervades relationships between friends, schoolmates, business associates, and even family members. You may be surprised to discover that children in the U.S. are expected to express their own ideas about various issues, that they have separate bedrooms and toys, and that they leave home to live on their own at a relatively early age. You may find it strange that Americans like to be alone by themselves sometimes, and that there is much emphasis on private property and personal opinions. These are all features of individualism. Some common sayings that illustrate individualism in the U.S. are "Every man for himself," "To each his own," and especially "Do your own thing."

EQUALITY: Tremendous importance is attached to the concept of human equality in the U.S. This concept means both (1) that one tends to treat other people as peers, even in cases when one knows very well that they are not peers, and (2) that everyone expects to have an equal opportunity to achieve his or her personal goals in life. It is important to keep in mind that *Americans are aware of social class differences*, but that they more or less pretend that these differences don't exist or at least are minimal. There are no special forms of address based on social position or age, such as are common in many other countries. Furthermore, English makes no distinction between a formal "you"

and a familiar "you," unlike most other languages. Even people in service professions (taxi drivers, waiters, shoe shiners, and so forth) expect to be treated with basic respect by those whom they are serving. Some visitors to the U.S. are shocked to discover that Americans call each other by their first names, even upon having met for the first time. You must not think that such informality means that Americans lack respect for each other; rather, the explanation lies in the spirit of equality and democracy that is pervasive throughout the United States.

FRIENDLINESS: Because Americans are highly mobile, they have developed skills that enable them to make friends in virtually any new setting. You will find, therefore, that most Americans are very warm and accepting toward you from the moment they first meet you, and that they treat you very informally in almost every conceivable social situation. You should be aware, however, that this friendliness does not necessarily mean that the Americans are interested in long-lasting, intimate friendships. Some foreign visitors come to feel, after several months in the U.S., that Americans are dishonest because they have not followed through by working to maintain a strong friendship after the initial show of warmth and informality. But deep friendship takes a long time to develop in the U.S. as in most other countries. More importantly, *the high mobility of Americans actually discourages many of them from forming deep, intimate friendships*, for such friendships are difficult to handle when one wants to move on to another job or another community. Consequently, some foreign visitors find that the friendliness of people in the U.S. seems rather superficial in the long run.

ASSERTIVENESS: Most people in the U.S. tend to be candid and outspoken, and to be willing to share with others a wide range of facts about themselves, even on short acquaintance. (There are taboo topics in the U.S.; for instance, one does not discuss one's income level.) In the northern and eastern parts of the U.S. especially, people ask "direct" questions and expect "straight" answers. When Americans have disagreements or become angry with each other, they usually try to resolve their differences in a face-to-face meeting rather than relying on the services of go-betweens. In dealing with others who are seeking advice or guidance, they try to be as accurate and objective as possible; they do not try to say something that will be momentarily pleasing. U.S. people tend not to be deeply concerned about causing others to "lose face." On the other hand, it is important to realize that Americans certainly do *not* deliberately set out, day by day, to insult or pick fights with others. They value friendliness and mutual agreement, and they are quite capable of telling "white lies" in order to eliminate unnecessary embarrassment in many social situations.

HARD WORK: Working hard is considered in a very positive light in the United States. In theory if not always in actual practice, working hard provides a road to personal success and material well-being, and

enables the individual (even someone from a humble background) to climb the ladder of social prestige and wealth. There is a deeply held belief in the U.S., known as the "Horatio Alger myth," that *anyone* -- through persistence, talent, and especially hard work -- can rise well above the station in life to which he or she was born. This emphasis on "the work ethic" helps to explain the importance that U.S. people place on values such as efficiency, punctuality, and practicality. Students very often are encouraged to work after their classes, on weekends, and/or during vacations; in some cases students work even though their families do not need the extra money that they can earn. Work is considered a valuable experience for children and youth, one that teaches them the value of hard work and enables them to be a contributing member of their family and community. Because of such early training, the self-esteem of many Americans is severely reduced if they are denied the opportunity (say, through unemployment or illness) of performing productive work.

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

People from different cultures attach a wide variety of meanings to the same specific non-verbal behavior: looking another person in the eye, laughing a certain way, touching a person on the head, holding up two fingers, and so forth. Many misunderstandings between culturally different people arise simply because a non-verbal signal of some kind was misinterpreted. One of the best ways to keep such misinterpretations to a minimum is to remember that *it is rare for people to act deliberately disrespectful or insulting towards others, especially towards strangers or visitors.* This rule applies to the people of the U.S. just as it does to almost all other peoples of the world. Therefore, if you have the feeling that an American has slighted or insulted you through a certain behavior, or through the absence of an expected behavior, you probably have made the common mistake of interpreting *acceptable* U.S. behavior according to the standards and expectations of your own home culture.

Non-verbal behavior involves innumerable complex and subtle sounds of the voice and movements of the body. It is impossible for us to provide a complete overview of U.S. non-verbal behavior in a few paragraphs. We have gathered together a few facts, however, that may help you in making correct interpretations of certain typical behaviors of U.S. people.

In general, people in the U.S. do not touch each other frequently. What is particularly lacking is the freedom to come into lengthy and frequent bodily contact with other people of the *same* sex. Women are freer about touching each other than are men; nevertheless, one rarely sees women walking arm-in-arm, as is common in some other cultures. American men touch each other only infrequently and very briefly; lengthy touch-

ing between men is viewed as a sign of homosexuality, and therefore is avoided. As suggested earlier, lengthy and frequent touching between men and women is normal, but the implication is that sexual attraction or romantic involvement exists between the two.

Americans are most likely to come into direct bodily contact with each other when greeting or taking leave. Men shake hands at such times; men who are good friends and who have been (or expect to be) separated for a long time may give each other a brief hug. Men *never* kiss each other. In general, the same rules apply to women greeting or separating from other women, although they are free to kiss each other lightly on one or both cheeks (or to touch cheek-to-cheek and kiss the air) if this is common in their social circle. The traditional pattern for a man and woman is that they shake hands only if the woman takes the initiative by offering her hand. In recent decades, however, the rules for men and women in some social circles have broadened to include men's taking the initiative in hand-shaking; a light kiss on the cheek between friends or relatives also is becoming increasingly common. Men and women may hug each other, even in the absence of romantic attachment, under the same conditions mentioned above for men.

When in conversation with one another, Americans generally stand about half a meter apart and look each other in the eye frequently but not constantly. The distance that is maintained between people in conversation can vary; for example, a larger distance is likely to be maintained between people who have a clear superior-subordinate relationship, while a lesser distance is common between peers who are good friends. You should be aware that, under most circumstances, *people in the U.S. instantly are made to feel very uncomfortable by others who stand very close to them.* A common exception occurs on public transportation vehicles during the crowded "rush hours," but in these cases the people who are very close to one another are careful to completely ignore each other.

Americans also feel very uncomfortable when dealing with others who look constantly into their eyes; on the other hand, they feel suspicious about others who never look into their eyes. In general, the rules for eye contact seem to be these: When you are *listening*, you should look into the speaker's eyes (or at least at his or her face) fairly constantly, with an occasional glance away. When you are *speaking*, you are freer to let your eyes wander as you talk, but you should look at the eyes of the listener from time to time to receive acknowledgement that he or she is listening and understands the points you are making.

Some visitors to the U.S. are shocked, insulted, or perplexed by certain common non-verbal behaviors of Americans. Here are a few facts for you to keep in mind: (1) Americans have no taboo of any kind associated with the left hand; they are as likely to touch you or to hand you objects with the left hand as with the right hand. (2) Americans have no

negative association with the soles of the feet or the bottom of the shoes; they do not feel it necessary to prevent others from seeing these locations. (3) A common way to greet small children in the U.S. is to pat them on the top of the head. (4) People in the U.S. often point with their index finger and wave it around in the air as they make especially important points in conversation. (5) One beckons to another person to come closer in the U.S. by holding the hand with the palm and fingers up, not down. (6) Americans show respect and deference for another person by looking him or her in the face, not by looking down. (7) Informal, relaxed postures are commonly assumed by U.S. people when they are standing or sitting, even when they are conversing with others; lack of formal posture is not a sign of inattention or disrespect. (8) Americans are uncomfortable with silence; they expect to talk rather constantly when in the presence of others. (9) In the U.S., the doors of rooms usually are left open unless there is a specific reason to close them. (10) Punctuality -- being on time -- is important to many U.S. people; they are likely to become quite annoyed if forced to wait more than 15 minutes beyond the scheduled time for meetings or appointments.

CONCLUDING NOTE

As your experience in the United States unfolds, you will discover for yourself the variety and diversity that prompted Mark Twain to say, "The only distinguishing characteristic of the American character I've been able to discover is a fondness for ice water." But we are confident that you also will see that there are some patterns and uniformities in the behavior of U.S. people, and we hope that this brief overview will enable you to notice some of these more readily and clearly.

One common feature of U.S. people that you are likely to notice is that most of them know very little about your country and culture, very little about the world beyond the borders of the U.S.A. Until recently, U.S. economic, political, and military power enabled most Americans to assume that it was not important for them to be knowledgeable about other countries and cultures. Now, as it is becoming obvious that the U.S. must be a sensitive and well informed member of the community of nations, educators and government officials are seeing the value of citizens who have a "global perspective." While you are here, you will have a wonderful opportunity to learn more about the United States and its people. *And we hope that, while you are here, you will help to educate us about your country and culture.* Your arrival on our shores is as much an opportunity for us as it is for you.

Welcome to the United States of America!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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For a more complete annotated bibliography on the culture of the U.S.A., write to the author of *A Fondness for Ice Water* at AFS International/Intercultural Programs, 313 East 43rd Street, New York, New York 10017, U.S.A.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE OF AFS INTERNATIONAL

AFS volunteers and professional staff throughout the world are moving towards the goal of peace by stimulating an awareness of mankind's common humanity, a wider understanding of the diverse cultures of the world, and a concern for the global issues confronting society. They acknowledge that peace is a dynamic concept threatened by injustices both between and within nations.

In pursuit of this goal, the core of the AFS experience has been the promotion of relationships in which families, communities, groups and maturing young persons from different cultural backgrounds share new learning situations related to the purposes of AFS. In addition, through experience and experimentation, AFS has developed and continues to encourage new models and opportunities for exchange that will be beneficial for the development of society.

AFS does not affiliate with any religious, political or partisan group, but it believes in the value of participating in a continuous process of interaction between cultures both across and within boundaries.

AFS encourages all participants to involve themselves in situations in which they can apply and project their AFS experience.

Additional copies of *A Fondness for Ice Water* may be obtained from the Research Department, AFS International, 313 East 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017, USA. Single copies cost $2.50; ten or more copies cost $2.00 per copy. For orders of fifty or more, a price may be negotiated. The minimum order that will be accepted from outside the U.S. is twelve copies, for which the charge will be US$30.00; additional copies US$2.00 each. The above charges cover postage and handling; shipping will be by air to locations outside North America. Payment must accompany orders. Pay by means of a check or money order made payable to *AFS International*; also write *Research 130* on the face of the check. Orders from outside the U.S. must include a check or money order payable in U.S. dollars and drawn on any bank in New York City. *A Fondness for Ice Water* is available without charge to AFS staff members and volunteers anywhere who intend to use it in conjunction with any AFS program; however, in this case it may be supplied without the covers.

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